

WORLD-SYSTEMS ANALYSIS

Immanuel Wallerstein

Yale University

Keywords: World-systems analysis, Nomothetic/idiographic epistemologies, TimeSpace Development/modernization, Cyclical rhythms and secular trends

Contents

1. Historical origins of world-systems analysis.
 2. Basic concepts of world-systems analysis
 3. Critiques of world-systems analysis
- Glossary
Bibliography
Biographical Sketch
To cite this chapter

Summary

World-systems analysis is a knowledge movement elaborated since the 1970's and is a critique of dominant modes of analysis in the nineteenth-century social sciences. It insists on three things primarily: (1) World-systems (and not nation-states) are the basic unit of social analysis; (2) Neither nomothetic nor idiographic epistemologies permit useful analyses of social reality; (3) The existing disciplinary boundaries within the social sciences no longer make any intellectual sense.

World-systems analysis is not a subdivision of the social sciences. It is another approach to, or perspective on, the ways in which one should undertake social analysis of historical reality. As a mode of analysis, it must itself be placed in its historical context, which is where we begin. This will be followed by a discussion of the distinctive features of world-systems analysis. Then we shall turn to reviewing arguments with its critics.

1. Historical Origins of World-systems Analysis

Concepts in the social sciences are seldom without precedent. But it is only when they receive considerable attention and a reasonable amount of empirical elaboration that we can consider that they have entered the purview of the social sciences as a structure of knowledge. In this restricted sense, world-systems analysis came into existence in the 1970s.

The dominant current in world social science from the late nineteenth century to circa 1970 was that social science consisted of a series of specified disciplines with more or less accepted boundary lines. Whereas, in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, there were a very large number of different appellations of university chairs that seemed to cover matters we today call social science, this list began to be reduced to a select few. As of 1945, the standard list included anthropology, economics, political science, and

